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The dark face of absolute liberty

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Conceptions of liberty and individual freedom are deeply embedded in contemporary western ideology and culture. However the dogmatic assertion of the inviolate rights of individuals may have adverse consequences for the level of commitment to a peaceful, harmonious, just and compassionate society.

Innate power describes the capacity of every individual to act unilaterally, including resort to force. In primitive times physically powerful people were able to dominate others. As human society evolved rules were developed to ensure collective security, resolve competing interests and regulate the arbitrary exercise of innate power (ensure law and order). The concept of a social contract neatly encapsulates the relationship (and natural tensions) between individual and collective interests. A central tenet of the social contract is the individual's obligation to eschew force (with the exception of an inalienable right to self-defence) in return for collective security, with the state holding a monopoly on the use of force.

History shows that power quickly accrued to the organised state able to mobilise a superior capacity for violence. After centuries of repression and violent conflict 18th century Enlightenment values sought to fundamentally recast the social contract and redress the power imbalance between the individual and the state. Given the preceding history the state was largely perceived as a malevolent force that acted for narrow interests against the common good. Enlightenment values asserted the pre-eminence of the free, autonomous and self-reliant individual, with the secular state deriving its power/authority/legitimacy through the willing consent of those governed.

Enlightenment values were embodied in the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in the late 18th century, and were instrumental in the formulation of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights following the end of World War Two. These values are an now an integral part of the contemporary international law that institutionalises human rights and defines the circumstances in which resort to force is justified (in self-defence, and in wars of national liberation to achieve self-determination).

The question of an appropriate balance between individual rights and social obligations remains a universal quandary. Does a culture that emphasises individual autonomy and self-reliance impact on the broader commitment to a peaceful and harmonious society? Does a libertarian culture inevitably engender some level of mistrust in the state and an associated lack of confidence in collective security? Where self-reliance extends to individual

responsibility for personal safety (by providing the individual with the means and authority to resort to force), what are the implications for the nature and extent of interpersonal violence?

For many years the United States has defined itself as an exceptional culturally advanced society that stands as a bastion for liberty against repressive foreign forces. Upholding the citizen's "natural" right to self-defence by enshrining a right to keep and bear arms in the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution is an integral part of this culture. For the same reasons the United States asserts an absolute right to take pre-emptive military action internationally against foreign adversaries in pursuit of its own self-defence. Domestically there is obvious dissonance between this self-image and the reality of extraordinary levels of interpersonal violence, political polarisation, social alienation and economic inequity.

These complex issues are bought into sharp contrast when we try to comprehend why American citizens regularly resort to indiscriminate large-scale violence against innocent civilians (such as mass shootings and occasional bombings). Is it simply because citizens have relatively unrestricted access to the means to effectively undertake such violence, or are there deeper issues about the real level of community commitment to a civilised society?

What is particularly interesting in the public discourse on violence in the United States is the vital distinction that is made between the threat posed by "foreign" terrorists (that seems to engender a visceral fear) and an apparently permissive attitude towards violence by citizens/criminals. In reality the actual harm in terms of casualties and damage between the two types of violence is largely indistinguishable. Protecting against a foreign terrorist carrying an improvised explosive device can warrant the expenditure of many millions of dollars on security measures, yet every day more than 80 people die from the use of readily available guns (the majority being suicides). This remarkable contradiction (and lack of proportion) is revealed again in the current coverage of and community response to the bombing of the Boston marathon.

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